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Trend Watch: Are You Ready?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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As many of you know, for several years now I've written an introduction for our print *Volunteer Energy Resource Catalog* that outlines trends I see percolating in late summer of each year. Our great Webmaster, Kristin, just suggested: "Why not use those reflections as the September Hot Topic?" And so we have! The point is not to save me writing time (though that's not a bad reason, either). It's because I'm genuinely interested in your assessment of the trends of the day. Do you see the same things, in the same way, as I do? What do you see differently? And, even more important, what other issues do you see surfacing for the volunteer world--both good and bad?

Excerpted from the 1999-2000 "Volunteer Energy Resource Catalog": Trend Watch: Are You Ready?

Below, as every year, I offer you my perspective on potentially important trends and their implications for the volunteer field. All come with the usual caveat that my crystal ball is not necessarily more prophetic than yours. I'm just willing to go out on a limb and put my opinions in print (and you'll have the opportunity to do the same at the end of my list!)

1. International Year of Volunteers 2001 (IYV2001):

Last year I highlighted the globalization of our field and our wonderful international network of colleagues continues to expand. IYV2001 is one of the ways we can connect further. But YV2001 is just around the corner and, as of the date of this new catalog, most of us still do not know what is planned. We all have a stake in the success of this Year, and we will all regret it if we blow this opportunity. United Nations Volunteers (UNV), the UN agency charged with the administration of the celebration, wants every country to develop its own way of observing IYV2001. While this is fine, we still need some international connecting link to bring the global volunteer community together for one year--getting past internal and international politics. The good news is that we don't have to wait for anyone. IYV2001 is a real thing and each of us can make as much of it as we choose (read more about it at <https://www.unv.org/>). Every Volunteer Center, local DOVIA or state association, academic philanthropy program, and individual volunteer program manager can use IYV as leverage for visibility and recognition.

2. Short-term or Episodic Commitments.

I hereby officially proclaim that this is no longer a trend, but a fixed reality! Most new volunteers seek assignments with a clear beginning, middle and end. One-time-only volunteering opportunities, such as those coordinated by "Hands On" or "City Cares" organizations, continue to expand. The good news in all this is that, after people have gotten their feet wet in a successful volunteer effort, they often turn around and say: "What can I do next?" So volunteer program managers might start thinking of retention in terms of an ongoing sequence of short-term assignments.

3. Singles as a Target Audience.

Connected to the popularity of one-day volunteer projects, there's a new awareness of an old fact: people who volunteer make friends with other volunteers who share their interests. In a world in which young people delay marriage and in which divorce hits half the couples in the U.S., it isn't surprising that volunteering is being adopted as part of the singles scene. In fact, the tongue-in-cheek recruitment pitch that "volunteering is safer than a singles bar" really resonates today! An increasing number of programs are targeting single volunteers, either as their only participants or for specially-designated work shifts.

4. Welfare Reform.

This is an issue with inconsistent effect on volunteer programs because each state handles it differently--as do a number of other countries around the world. As public assistance rolls are decreased by requiring able-bodied men and women to get a job or go to school, the question of where volunteering fits into the picture is raised. In many states, volunteering is a legally-approved alternative to a paying job or training, allowing someone to keep welfare benefits if s/he logs a certain number of community service hours which are viewed as benefiting the public. But in other states, the opposite reasoning applies: if someone is volunteering, then they can't be seriously looking for a paying job, so community service is disallowed. The jury is not yet in on any of this.

5. Internet-based Distance Learning.

I've mentioned some new development in cyberspace for the past several years in this trend watch, and technology continues to open new virtual doors. The number and quality of Web sites, listservs and newsgroups offering resources for volunteer program leaders continue to grow. Look for the addition of several exciting uses of this electronic medium, including complete books available at no charge online (look out for books online on the Website soon!), increasing use of audio, and the introduction of streaming video for distance learning options, such as that being piloted by The Learning Institute for Nonprofit Organizations (<http://www.uwex.edu/li/>). We are also seeing complete online courses in volunteer management, some even giving academic credit. Now the challenge is to see how volunteer program managers can adapt the technology to train and update active volunteers.

6. Family volunteering.

While receiving much lip service over the years, most agencies have not yet found meaningful ways to put family units to work as volunteers. Interest in this idea is increasing as the century ends, as evidenced by new guidebooks, training materials, and conference presentations. Of course, to make

the idea work, we have to recognize the many variations that the word family covers today. Intact nuclear families are in the minority. But volunteer programs can tap into grandparents raising grandchildren, divorced parents with joint custody or visitation time, homes with adults who are each others significant other, and the ties between older and younger siblings.

7. International VPM-Day.

On December 5, 1999, a new holiday begins! Thanks to the driving force of Nan Hawthorne and an ad hoc steering committee of colleagues on the CyberVPM listserv, leaders of volunteer programs will now have a day to recognize their efforts alongside volunteers (see <http://www.nonprofitspace.org/vpm-day/>). December 5 is International Volunteer Day as proclaimed by the United Nations (and has been since 1984, although most North Americans are unaware of it). This is a day to celebrate the work and accomplishments of volunteers in any setting, anywhere. That's why VPM-Day is also December 5. The point is to show that volunteers rarely do it alone-- every volunteer effort takes coordination. We can grab this opportunity to focus attention on leaders, paid and volunteer, and on the skills of volunteer administration.

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Submitted by John Robertson, Residential Resource Manager, Capital City Youth Services, Tallahassee, FL

On service and motivations: Managing volunteers at a runaway shelter, I deal with a service organization comprised of .primarily single, young professionals. Their program is called Service Made Simple. The cornerstone of their program is to make volunteer service easy and hassle free for the busy and otherwise, unavailable professional. I have conflicts when they realize that training and accountability occur on site and service is not always as simple as it sounds. I believe their organization functions as a networking club for singles and working with youth has a certain charm that "sells". I find that once they begin to visit, they either feel the true call or "get their fix and move on".

Submitted by Karen Knaub, Director of Volunteer Services, Sedgwick Co. Zoo, Wichita, Kansas

I have another topic to add to the fire - inmates as volunteers. About a year and a half ago we began a cooperative venture with a minimal security correctional facility located about forty-five minutes south of Wichita. Four days per week we have the aid of seven minimal security inmates. They are not violent offenders and most are on their way out of the correction system. Inmates are screened for the skills we specify before they are sent to work with us. Zoo staff supervising inmates attend a three day training by correctional officers at their facility. Inmates are assigned only to non-public areas. Needless to say, this program was not an easy sell. Low cost, consistent availability of a labor force and good experiences with other city and county agencies were the positive points. There were many "what if" and worse-case scenarios. I spent about a year getting the program up and going. Some say it is the best thing we ever did. Others will never love it, although they have learned to live with it. Their accomplishments have outlasted any criticism. But do they belong under the roof of the volunteer department? Anyone out there have a reaction? Questions? I'd like to know.

Submitted by Jane Styles, Manager, Volunteer Development, Alberta/NWT Division, Canadian Diabetes Association, Alberta, Canada

In response to Ontario, Canada's comment that volunteering has become a prerequisite for completing a high school diploma, two things come to mind. First, how many high school students will be volunteering for the "right" reason? There are many good reasons why people volunteer but if getting their diploma is their only motivation, then that is not good enough. There must be buy-in with the organization students are volunteering for. Second, I can see that this sort of initiative can be a win-win situation provided teachers and students are taught/trained why volunteering is a noble act and what they will get out of it with the right attitude. Volunteer sector management may need to take the lead on educating their local school boards.

Submitted by Laura Slater, Program Director/ ESPM, ND

I am responding to your welfare reform Volunteer article- I am from North Dakota and work in a non profit. I have been on Welfare too. I think that allowing volunteer service for welfare benefits is a win win situation for both parties if the state allows it and the volunteer station allows the welfare worker to expand their horizons.

We are a rural community and there are not a lot of jobs outside the restaurant industry. Our wages are still very low and welfare people do not make enough to support their families on part time work with no benefits. Into this picture you add many community service workers needing hours as well. The problem I see here is we have this pool of workers that most nonprofits want as janitors and slaves. Allow them to act as customer service reps for your agency. Allow them to file folders, make databases, write letters, do jobs on the computer or in the agency that can help them gain skills to find a decent job. Many of these workers are very EAGER to learn and get off the system

Submitted by Lesley Dunn, Executive Director, Volunteer Resource Centre, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

Halifax, Nova Scotia hosted, in conjunction with Volunteer Canada, a focus group addressing the issues relating to IYV in Canada. This was continued five times across our country, followed up with a telephone interview with key stakeholders in each province and then a large group meeting in April.

The results of the focus groups and telephone interviews were astonishingly similar. Although the year should recognize effort and contribution, it was strongly felt the voluntary sector should receive as one of the outcomes for this year recognition for being a key player in social reform and for the contributions of unpaid service to the GDP. It was further suggested that the year focus on professional development for those working in the field.

In an attempt to expand the view points, the Volunteer Resource Centre in Halifax is looking to hold ten additional focus groups across the province to ensure we receive direction from all demographic and geographic areas. The feedback from these sessions will be presented to our Provincial Government as target objectives for the year. We feel it is critical for us to take the lead in the development of activities for 2001 to ensure the year results in a legacy and not an abstract memory.

Submitted by Elizabeth Lowenger, Volunteer Services Coordinator, CLSC Rene-Cassin, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

Lately I have heard so much about organizations trying to market to the black hole of volunteering, namely to recruit the 40 - 55 year olds. These are people who are either working or raising a family and may even be taking care of aging parents. What would attract them to volunteer ... what are their patterns of volunteerism? What do you think???

Submitted by Elizabeth Ellis, Face to Face Health and Counseling Service. Inc., President , St. Paul Area DOVIA, Minnesota, USA

The growing trend of "community service" for High School graduation requirements is a hot and passionate topic for me and others. As both a Director of Volunteer Services receiving calls from youth seeking volunteer positions and a mother of 5 teenagers looking for "things to do", I have experienced what is lacking on both ends of the spectrum regarding expectations, guidelines, training, and benefits of youth volunteerism.

Students are not being "educated" as to why they should be excited about the opportunities which tie into learning while volunteering, how they should look for a position, and usually they do not know where or who to call. How many Volunteer Service Directors get the expected call of, "Hello, I'm a student and need to complete 40 hours of volunteer time by tomorrow. Do you have anything for me to do?".

Why not emulate the college internship guidelines and expectations with high school students. Students could take an interest survey at the beginning of their freshman year to determine their career interests. By sophomore year, they could be required to research five career areas and determine the education, income and fields each area would lead to. Junior year, interview two of the five career areas for potential volunteer positions; learning of the environment, expectations, roles people play, what their career paths lead them to. Senior year, pick a location where they could commit a specific amount of time (for credit), to volunteer in their specific area.

It would help Volunteer Managers to know when this required volunteering was going to take place. It seems to happen randomly in this area, with no communication from the local schools of requirements or times, contacts or expectations. I would like to see something take place during the coming year which strengthens this idea for all involved, especially the students being asked to do the work!

Submitted by Julie Gillis, Assistant Director of Community Relations, Austin, State Hospital, Austin, TX

At our hospital we love episodic volunteers who come in to give monthly birthday parties for patients, holiday parties, gift wrapping, and cake baking. Our patients have psychiatric disorders so it is a great gift to have social activities for them. I do outreach to high schools, churches and community/college groups letting them know we are an option for service opportunities. We usually include an orientation about mental illness, a speaker and a tour of a ward along with the party so that we blend education and fun for the volunteers.

Submitted by Michael Wyland, Partner, Sumption & Wyland, Sioux Falls, SD USA

My partner, Margaret Sumption (a volunteer center board member, BTW), has a radical idea: if all an agency's volunteers were to do a one-day "walkout", what would be the impact on the organization? Targeting one industry, like hospitals, would focus an ED's attention FAST! Thanks to Susan for fighting the good fight!

Submitted by Mary R. Nielsen, Lake Mich College Mendel Center, Michigan, USA

I encourage our volunteers to really feel part of our organization, to take part in planning events from the ground up. We take approximately 5 new volunteers a year to be "under the wings" of veteran volunteers. My challenge: although I am pleased with a volunteer's sense of ownership for our organization, how do I handle the volunteer whose attitude changes from team player to "sole owner" and becomes bossy to the other volunteers.?

Submitted by Annette Pinkney, Coordinator of Volunteers, KFL&A Health Unit, Ontario/Canada

Another trend, especially in Canada will be student volunteers on the increase. It is now part of the requirements for a high school diploma that each student complete 40 hours of volunteer work before graduation. This should lend itself to some creative volunteer programs that would involve students with short term projects requiring minimal training. This could be a win-win situation for everyone...lets make it challenging and meaningful so they will come back just for the fun of it!

Submitted by Lynn Carroll, Volunteer Program Coordinator, The Nature Conservancy of Pennsylvania, PA, USA

I have been faced with the "Short-term / Episodic Commitment" reality over and over in the past year. I have struggled to find ways to find one-time volunteer projects which are worth the investment, without "creating" busywork. I don't have any pearls of wisdom, but it's great to hear that I'm not the only one who faces this situation!

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